

From the Archives – 19th March 2026

The origins of tennis at Roehampton Club



As we approach the Roehampton 125 Tennis Open at the end of this month, it seems appropriate to look back at the origins of the game at the Club when tennis courts appeared in the early twentieth century, marking a natural evolution of the Club's sporting offerings. When Roehampton Club opened in April 1902 as an officers' polo club, lawn tennis had already been well established in Britain for over two decades. The game itself had been formalized with rules laid down by the Marylebone Cricket Club in 1875 and subsequently amended by the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club, with the first Wimbledon tournament taking place in 1877.

The first formal tennis infrastructure at Roehampton Club appeared in 1912. At that time, the Club's membership profile – drawn from affluent and well-connected officers – combined with its reputation for high-quality croquet lawns made the introduction of tennis facilities a logical sporting development. The extension of the Club's lease to include additional land in 1912 provided the necessary space to expand beyond its original polo facilities and create dedicated tennis courts.

The Tennis Committee and early organization

The establishment of organized tennis at Roehampton Club formally began with the first meeting of the newly appointed Tennis Committee on Thursday 11 April 1912. This inaugural meeting was chaired by Mr C.D. Miller and attended by Mr A. Stuart Morrison, Mr F.R.D. Onslow, Mr C.E. Adams, and Mr J. de Courcy Atkins.

The Committee moved with remarkable organisational efficiency, provisionally agreeing upon eleven lawn tennis bye laws to govern play. These bye laws, developed in consultation with the Secretary of Chiswick Park Tennis Club, Mr J.N. Burkhill, covered a comprehensive range of matters including footwear requirements, court costs, booking arrangements, playing times, club matches, and tournaments. The governing rules of play themselves were adopted directly from the Lawn Tennis Association.

Court costs and access (1912):

- Members: five shillings per hour (for up to one and a half hours)
- Visitors on weekdays: one shilling
- Visitors on weekends: two shillings
- Members were required to provide their own tennis balls; the Club would only supply balls for official matches and tournaments

Infrastructure expansion and the Tennis Professional

By May 1912, the Committee confirmed the appointment of Tom Fleming as the Club's first Tennis Professional. He was caricatured in the *Tatler* in the same year. This was a remarkable distinction for its time; there were very few recognized tennis professionals in Britain at this era, with only a handful of European clubs able to support such appointments. Fleming provided coaching lessons at four shillings per hour and offered racquet repair services. Ball boys were also available for sixpence each.



Fleming himself was an accomplished player: he had won two Irish Tennis Championships (1890 and 1891) and achieved seven titles at the British Covered Court Championships between 1887 and 1896, five of which were won at Hyde Park and two at Queen's Club. His appointment elevated the Club's standing in the tennis world considerably.

By July 1912, the Club had established seven grass courts and six hard courts for the coming season. By 1922, this had expanded to twelve grass and twelve hard courts, and by the end of the 1920s, the Club possessed a total of 37 courts in almost continuous weekend use.

Early competitive tournaments

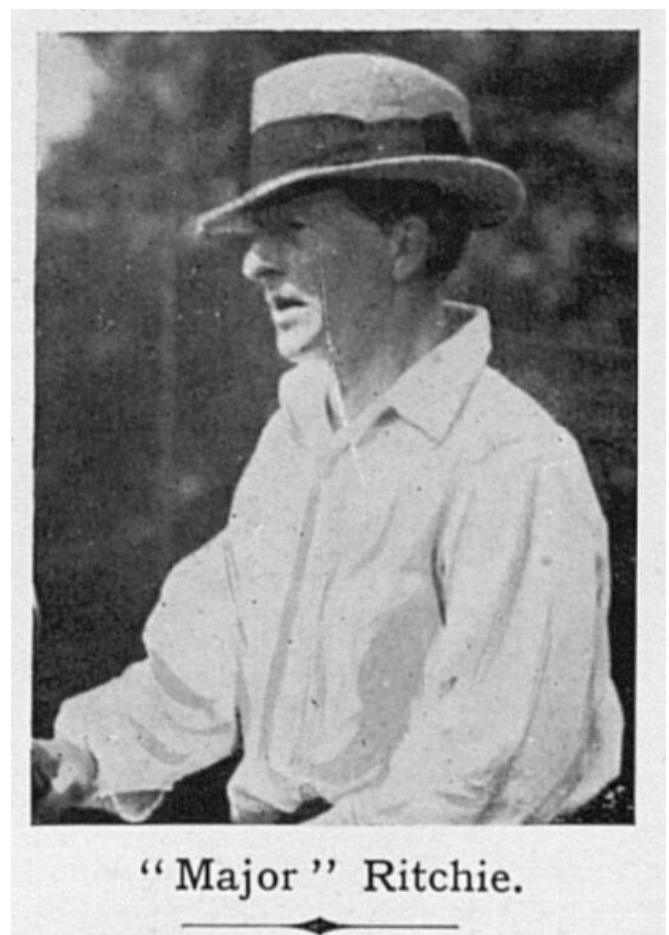
The first Member tournament took place in 1913, with matches agreed at the June 1912 meeting to occur from 18th June through 31st July. Matches were played on grass courts unless both players mutually agreed to use the hard courts.

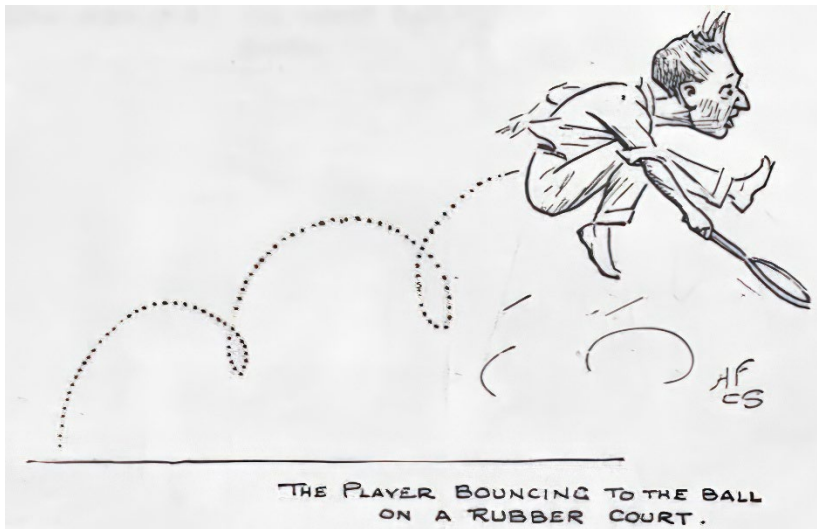
The first open tennis tournament proved to be a milestone event. Decided upon in March 1914 and sanctioned by the Lawn Tennis Association, it took place from 11th May 1914. The Games Manager, Major Larcombe, drafted the tournament programme with prize money that reflected serious competitive intent: £5 for the Men's Singles winner and £4 for the Ladies Singles winner. The event proved remarkably successful; *The Sporting News* reported in May 1914 that 'for their first hard court tournament, the Roehampton Executive met with such pronounced success that one may feel certain the meeting will now occupy a recognised place in future years'.

In July 1919 Roehampton Club staged its first post-war lawn tennis tournament, signalling the revival of top-class grass-court play on the Club's courts after the upheaval of the First World War. Known simply as the Roehampton Grass Courts, this inaugural post-war meeting attracted a strong field and quickly re-established the Club's reputation as one of London's leading tennis venues, just a step below Wimbledon.

Contemporary reports show that it was not only a serious competition but also a social and sporting occasion in the best Roehampton Club tradition. One much-quoted incident involved a visiting player who arrived brandishing a radically oversized racquet, to the great amusement of spectators and the Club's professionals. The episode captured the experimental spirit of the time as players, manufacturers and clubs all adapted to the new post-war landscape. From these 1919 beginnings the Roehampton Club grass-court tournaments developed into a long-running series that would later be known as the Rothmans Grass Court Invitation Roehampton and continue until 1967, providing generations of Members with close-up views of many of the leading players of their day.

The inaugural Men's Singles champion was Major Josiah George Ritchie, a 40-year-old player with an impressive pedigree. Ritchie had reached the finals of numerous Wimbledon championships and other significant European tournaments, and had won a gold medal at the 1908 London Olympics – a distinction that remained unmatched by a British male player until Andy Murray's achievement in 2012.





The revolutionary hard court innovation (1923)

Perhaps the most significant innovation in Roehampton Club's tennis history came in April 1923, when the Club laid one of Britain's first tennis courts made from wool and rubber – a revolutionary surface at the time caricatured by Roehampton Club Member HF Crowther-Smith. Writing in the *Daily Sketch* on 11th April 1923, H.F. Crowther-Smith heralded this innovation as potentially transformative for the game.

At a time when tennis was intrinsically associated with grass lawns (the term 'lawn tennis' explicitly referring to the grass surface), Crowther-Smith argued that the new surface opened possibilities to revolutionize the game. He even suggested that Wimbledon should adopt glass roofs and proposed that the game's very name might need revision – from 'lawn tennis' to simply 'tennis' – given the emergence of alternative playing surfaces including red rubble, wood, asphalt, and cement.

The Surrey Hard Court Championships

The Club's dominance in hard court tennis was cemented through its hosting of the prestigious Surrey Hard Court Championships. These championships were first staged in 1914 and were hosted continuously at Roehampton Club until 1939. The event became a major fixture in the British tennis calendar and attracted world-class competitors.

One of the regular players in the early years of this competition was a great aunt of an existing Club Member – Mrs Phyllis King. Prior to her marriage when she was known as Miss Mudford, she won the Wimbledon Ladies Doubles Competition in 1931 with her partner Mrs Shepherd-Barron.



THE NEW KENT LAWN TENNIS CHAMPION: MISS PHYLLIS MUDFORD, WHO BEAT MISS DOROTHY ROUND 6-1, 6-2 IN THE BECKENHAM FINAL.

Conclusion

The origins of tennis at Roehampton Club reflect the sporting aspirations of its affluent officer-class membership and the broader popularization of lawn tennis in Edwardian Britain. From its formal establishment in 1912, through the appointment of Tom Fleming and the creation of competitive tournaments, to its pioneering adoption of hard court surfaces in 1923, Roehampton Club established itself as one of Britain's premier tennis venues. The Club's archives contain substantial documentation of this evolution, providing valuable insights into the development of organized competitive tennis in the early twentieth century.

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